Deadly bat malady found in North Carolina

Media Advisory:
The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will host a press conference call at 2:00 p.m. Eastern time on Wednesday, Feb. 9, 2011 at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Asheville Field Office, 160 Zillicoa St., Asheville, NC, 28801.

Number: 888/604-9365
Passcode: wildlife
Present:

- Chris McGrath, NCWRC, wildlife diversity program coordinator
- Kendrick Weeks, NCWRC, mountain wildlife diversity supervisor
- Gabrielle Graeter, NCWRC, wildlife diversity biologist
- Carolyn Rickard, NCWRC, public affairs officer
- Sue Cameron, USFWS, endangered species biologist
- Gary Peeples, USFWS, public affairs officer
- Tom MacKenzie, USFWS, public affairs officer
- Jeremy Coleman, USFWS, national white-nose syndrome coordinator
- Sue McBean, N.C. Division of Parks & Recreation, superintendent, Grandfather Mountain State Park
- Kevin Keel, Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, assistant research scientist

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White-nose syndrome, the disease that has killed hundreds of thousands of bats in the Eastern United States, has been discovered in a retired Avery County mine and in a cave at Grandfather Mountain State Park, marking the arrival of the disease in North Carolina.

"White-nose syndrome is confirmed in Virginia and Tennessee, so we expected we would be one of the next states to see the disease," said Gabrielle Graeter, a biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. "This discovery marks the arrival of one of the most devastating threats to bat conservation in our time."

Although scientists have yet to fully understand white-nose syndrome, current knowledge indicates it's likely caused by a newly discovered fungus, *Geomyces destructans* , which often grows into white tufts on the muzzles of infected bats, hence the disease's name. The first evidence of this fungus was collected in a New York state cave in 2006. Since then, it appears to have spread north into Canada and as far south as Tennessee, which reported its first occurrence last winter, and now North Carolina. In the Northeast, the disease has decimated some species of bats. It seems to be most fatal during the winter months, when hundreds of bats are hibernating together in caves and mines. It's not known if the

disease will similarly affect all species in all regions of the country, though bat mortality and the diversity of species affected in the Northeast suggest the impacts will be significant.

On Feb. 1, a team of Commission biologists were conducting a bat inventory of the closed mine where they saw numerous bats displaying symptomatic white patches of fungus on their skin. Five bats from the mine were sent to the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study unit at the University of Georgia for testing, which confirmed the presence of white-nose syndrome.

In late January, a team of state, federal, and private biologists were conducting a bat inventory of a cave at Grandfather Mountain when they discovered a single dead bat. Following state white-nose syndrome surveillance protocols, the bat was sent for testing and it has been confirmed for white-nose syndrome.

The discovery of white-nose syndrome comes as Commission biologists work through bat inventory and white-nose syndrome surveillance efforts at numerous caves and mines in western North Carolina this winter as part of a grant awarded by the Service to several states on the leading edge of the disease's spread.

North Carolina is home to three federally endangered bats, the Virginia big-eared, Indiana, and gray. Virginia big-eared bats are known from the Grandfather Mountain cave and have been seen in the Avery county mine, though not recently. Thus far, the disease has not been observed in Virginia big-eared bats farther north, however it has greatly impacted Indiana bat populations at infected caves and mines. Both of the North Carolina sites have Eastern small-footed, little brown, Northern long-eared, and tri-colored bats while big brown bats are also found at the mine – all bat species that have been affected to some degree by white-nose syndrome in the Northeast.

"The discovery does not bode well for the future of many species of bats in western North Carolina," said Sue Cameron with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. "Although researchers are working hard to learn more about the disease, right now so little is known. There has been some evidence that humans may inadvertently spread the disease from cave to cave, so one simple step people can take to help bats is to stay out of caves and mines."

"Cavers are passionate about what they do and we truly understand that asking them to stay out of caves is no small request and we greatly appreciate their sacrifice," said Cameron, noting that the western North Carolina caving club, Flittermouse Grotto, has been very supportive of efforts to protect the area's bats.

In 2009, fearing the disease could be transferred from cave to cave by humans, the Service released a cave advisory asking people to refrain from entering caves in states where white-nose syndrome has been confirmed and all adjoining states. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission holds a protective easement on the mine and both it and the Grandfather Mountain cave have been gated and closed to the public for years to protect hibernating bats.

For more information about white-nose syndrome, visit http://www.fws.gov/whitenosesyndrome.

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Photos can be found at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwssoutheast/sets/72157625882981881/

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